Rowland Evans and Robert Novak Post 1-10-73

J. Edgar Hoover's Legacy: A Political Snakepit at the FBI

AN UNDERCOVER campaign by the old-boy FBI network, past and present, against acting Director L. Patrick Gray has fully disclosed to the White House the tainted legacy of J. Edgar Hoover's 40-year reign over the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Key administration officials deny this campaign will influence President Nixon's decision whether to nominate Gray as the FBI's permanent director or look elsewhere. Nevertheless, Mr. Nixon has not yet made that decision. What makes this significant is that when the President named Gray acting director after Hoover's death nearly eight months ago, he fully intended to make it permanent.

Whatever happens to Gray, the difficulties he has encountered dramatize an unpleasant fact to the White House: The sudden end of Hoover's long personal tyranny left a political snakepit at the FBI. The Nixon inner circle is determined that the new director, whether Gray or not, must radically clean house.

It is Gray's house-cleaning that triggered the campaign against him by old Hoover hands. They were incensed by Gray's purge of Hoover favorites, particularly his elimination of the Bureau's crime records division, operated by sycophants as a propaganda agency for Hoover's glorification.

INDEED, the anti-Gray campaign can be traced partially to two old Hoover disciples: Clyde Tolson, who retired as the FBI's No. 1 man when Hoover died, and Cartha Deloach, once Hoover's heir-apparent and now a Pepsico executive. Tolson, at age 72 a semi-invalid, has displayed surprising energy chipping away at Gray's reputation in order to enshrine Hoover's memory.

But it would be gross simplification to limit Gray's detractors to the old Hoover clique. "When Gray was appointed, I said, 'at last we've got a human being,'" one anti-Hoover agent told us, "but we've been terribly disappointed."

That disappointment derives mainly from the fact that Gray, entering the FBI with three young lieutenants unfamiliar with the bureau, lopped off many anti-Hoover heads along with Hoover cronies. A prime example is Harold Leinbaugh, an anti-Hoover inspector in Washington who decided to retire after Gray ordered his exile to Detroit.

Moreover, anti-Hoover officials are disappointed that Gray emulated Hoover in spending much more time on public relations than running the bureau. They complain that Gray, who underwent surgery recently, does not spend enough time in Washington. Morale in the Domestic Intelligence Division, a hotbed of anti-Hoover feeling, is no higher under Gray.

THE RESULT: Present and former FBI men, pro-Hooverites and anti-Hooverites, are briefing newsmen and White House aides about Gray's iniquities. How can a man whose only previous command experience was as a submarine skipper in World War II, they ask, run the far-flung FBI? How can a man who spends long weekends in Stonington, Conn., and is called "two day Gray" at FBI headquarters run an operation of staggering dimensions?

Gray's enemies have no substitute candidate but describe the need for a quiet, highly competent professional less interested than Gray in personal publicity. Two largely anonymous assistant attorneys general, Harlington Wood at the Civil Division and Henry Petersen at the Criminal Division, are mentioned.

The menance is clear. If Gray is nominated, the old-boy network will slip derogatory information to the Senate judiciary committee. Liberal Democratic senators, eager to prove Gray has politicized the FBI serving Mr. Nixon's partisan interests, would be expected to cooperate.

But at the very least, Gray seems innocent of such political charges. Close students of the FBI know that Hoover's famed reputation for being above and beyond politics was sheer mythology and that Gray is non-political by comparison.

Gray's real problem is not directly related to hostile charges but goes to this puzzle: How to govern an absolute monarchy immediately after the king's death. John Ehrlichman, the President's top domestic aide, is well aware of this in considering his advice to Mr. Nixon. The anti-Gray campaign, whatever its impact on Ehrlichman's recommendation, has shown the White House the need for a strong hand to clean up the FBI.

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